Western NC Today: A Region Rooted in Rural Resilience

Patrick Woodie
President & CEO

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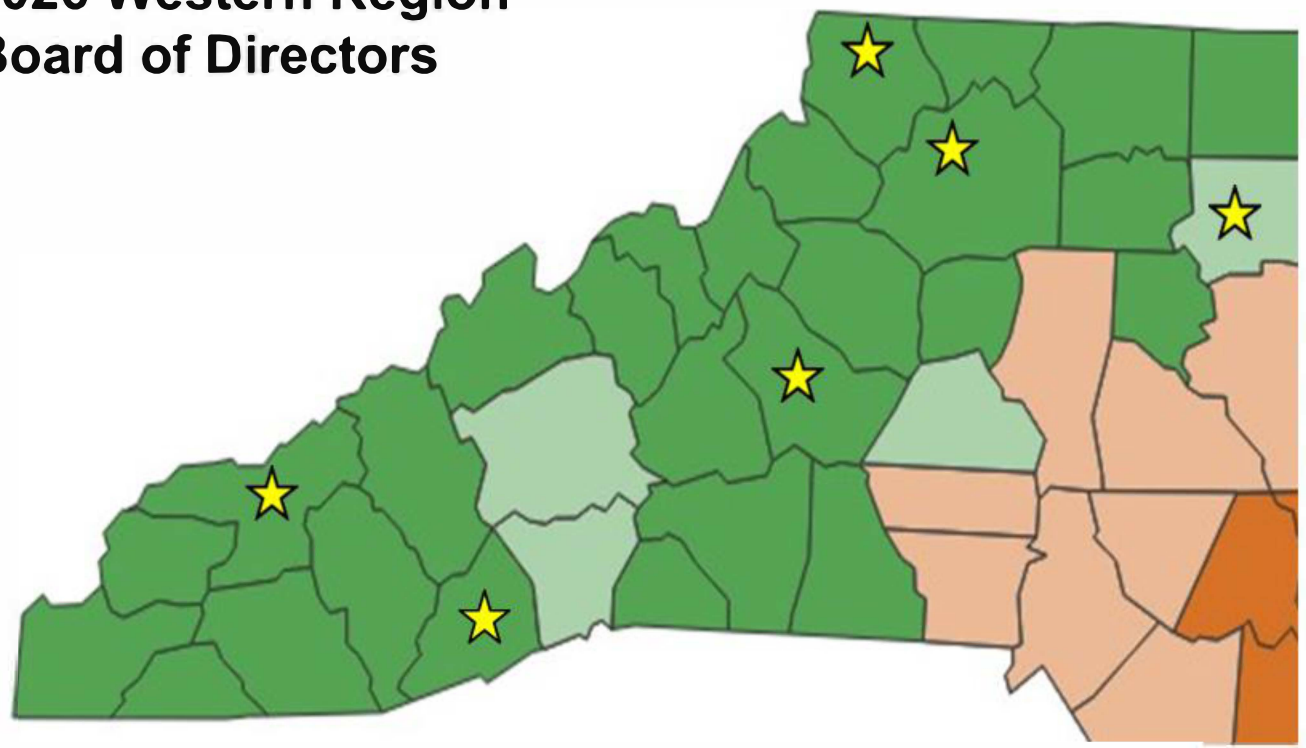
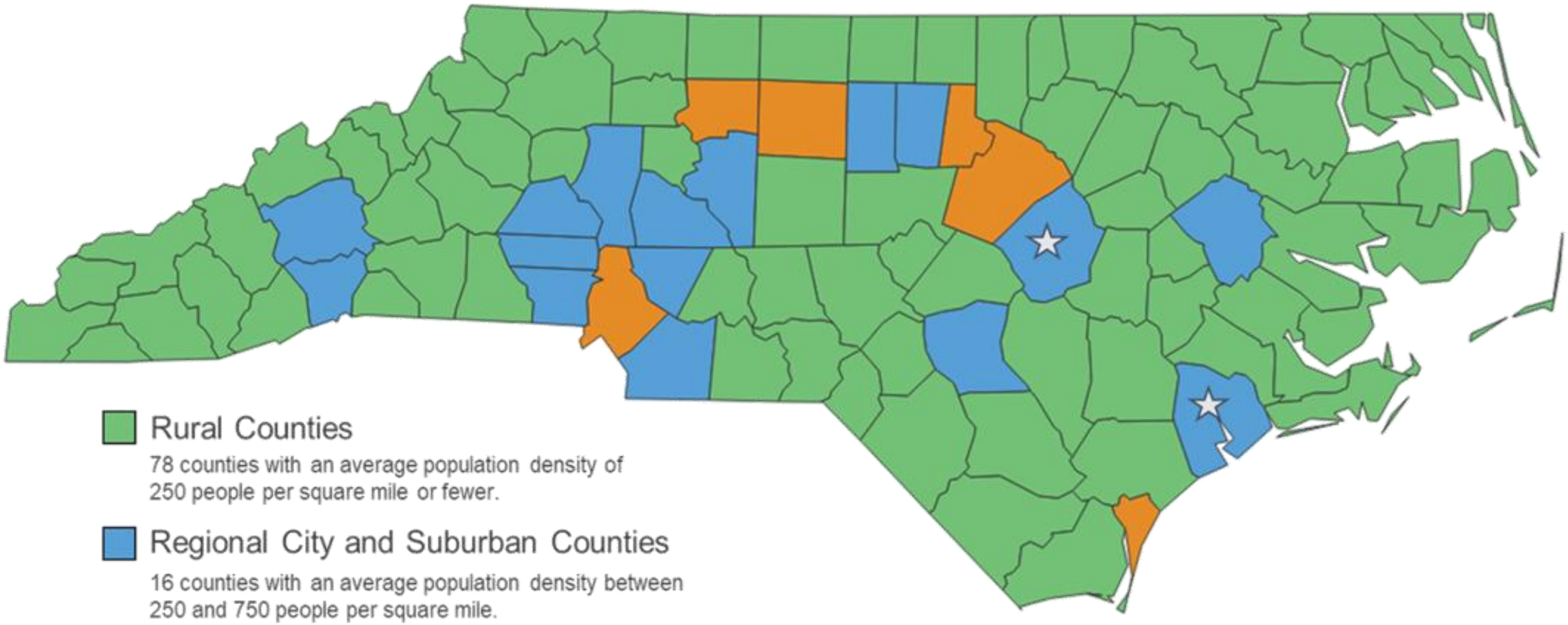


Note: Darker counties are classified as rural



Rural Counties

78 counties with an average population density of 250 people per square mile or fewer.

Regional City and Suburban Counties

16 counties with an average population density between 250 and 750 people per square mile.

Urban Counties

6 counties with an average population density of 750 people per square mile or more.

Densities calculated by the Rural Center based on the 2020 U.S. Decennial Census.

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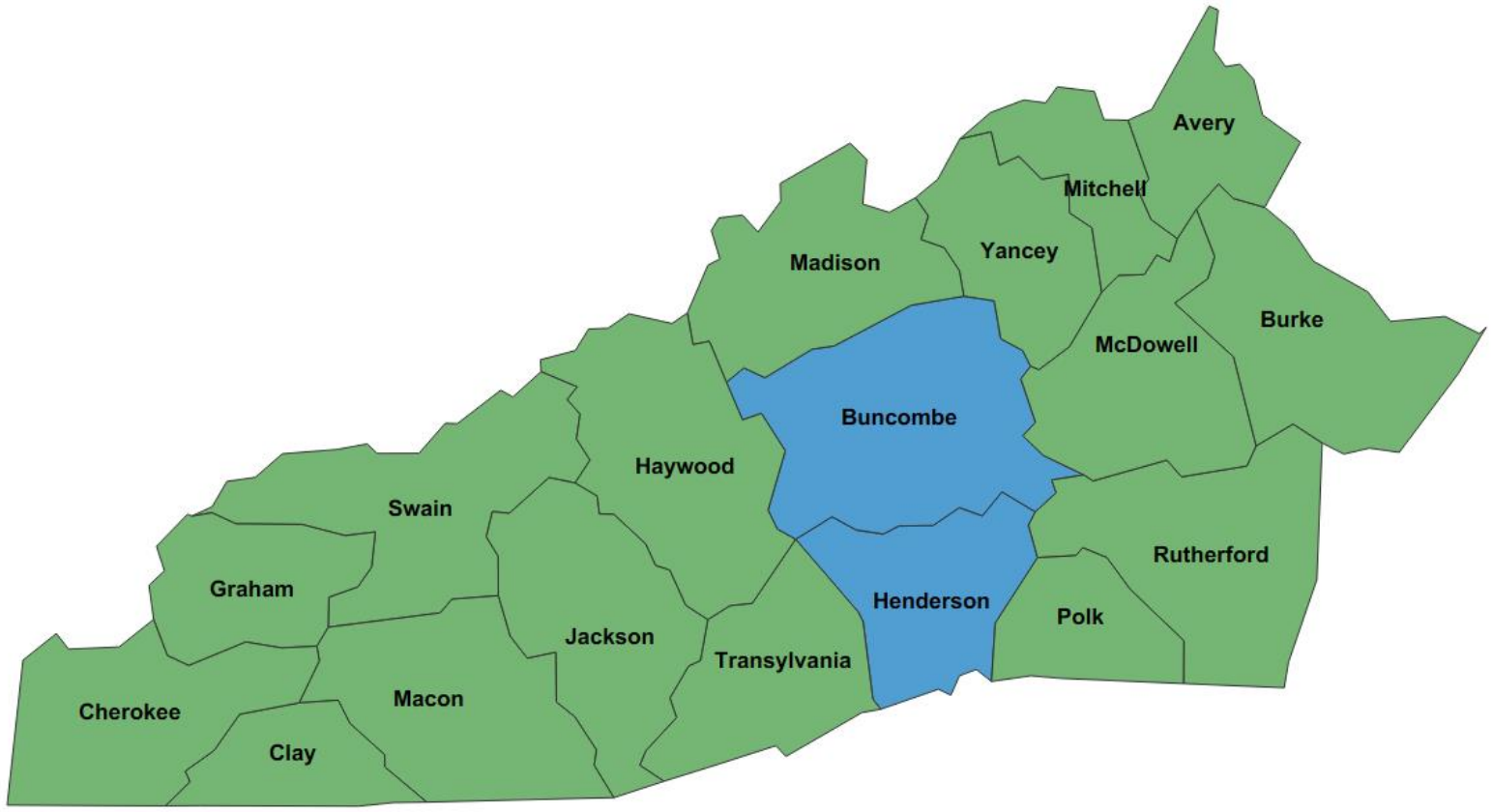
Rural Population in Western N.C.



Total Population
941,866

Rural
542,074 (58%)

Suburban
399,792 (42%)

Urban
0 (0%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Population Estimates and Components of Change (Vintage 2025)

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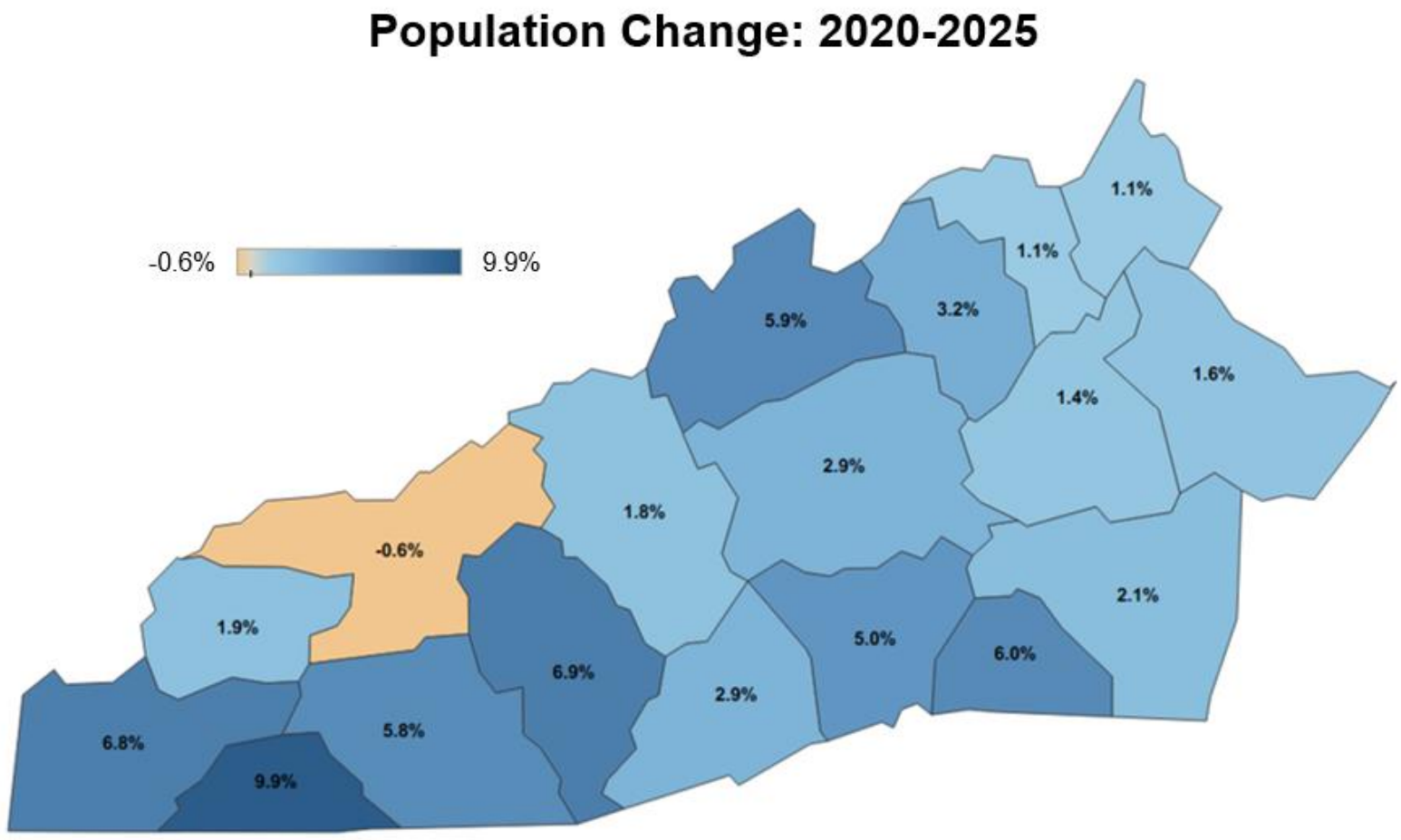
Almost Every County Has Grown Population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Population Estimates and Components of Change (Vintage 2025)

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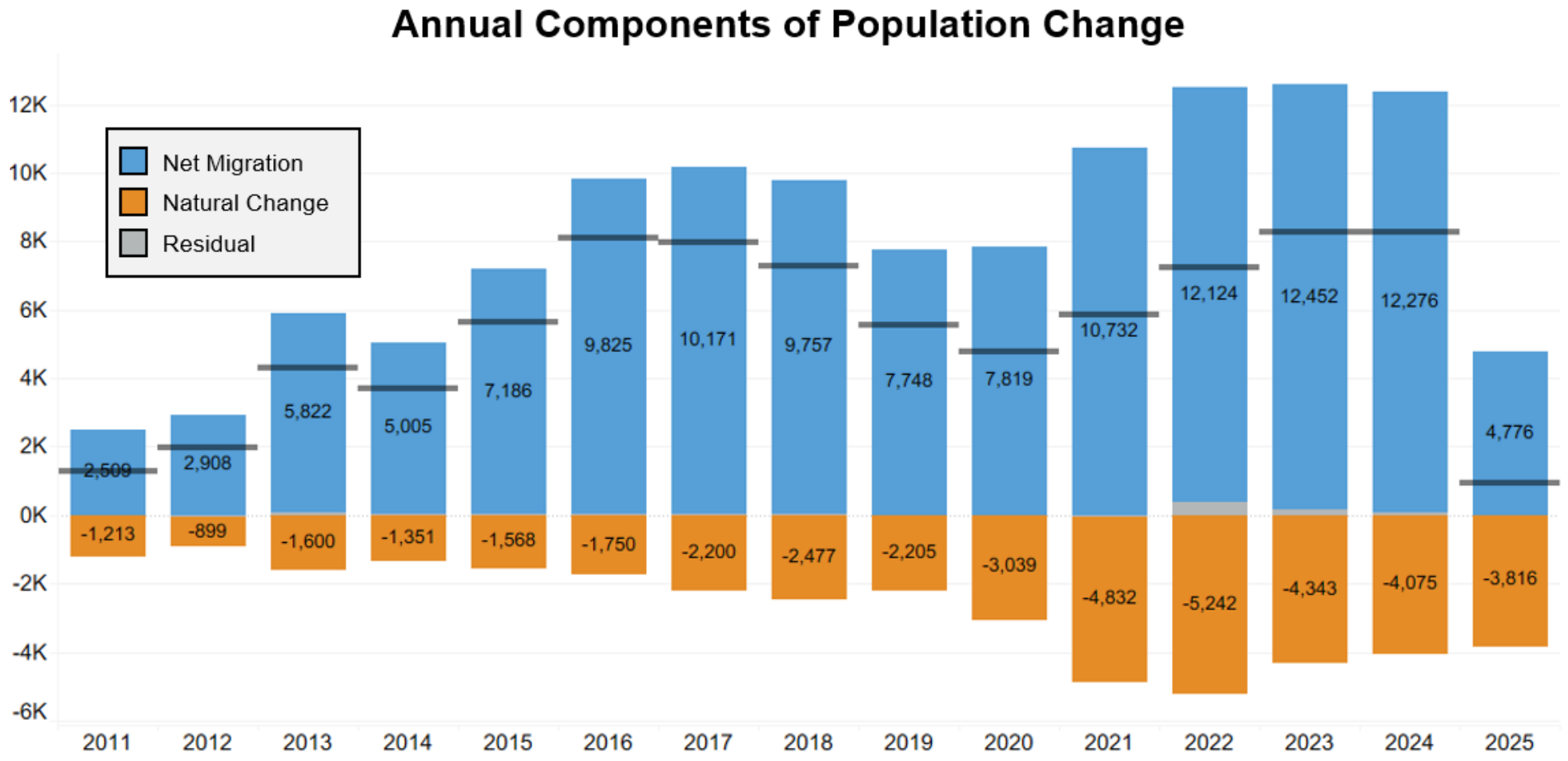
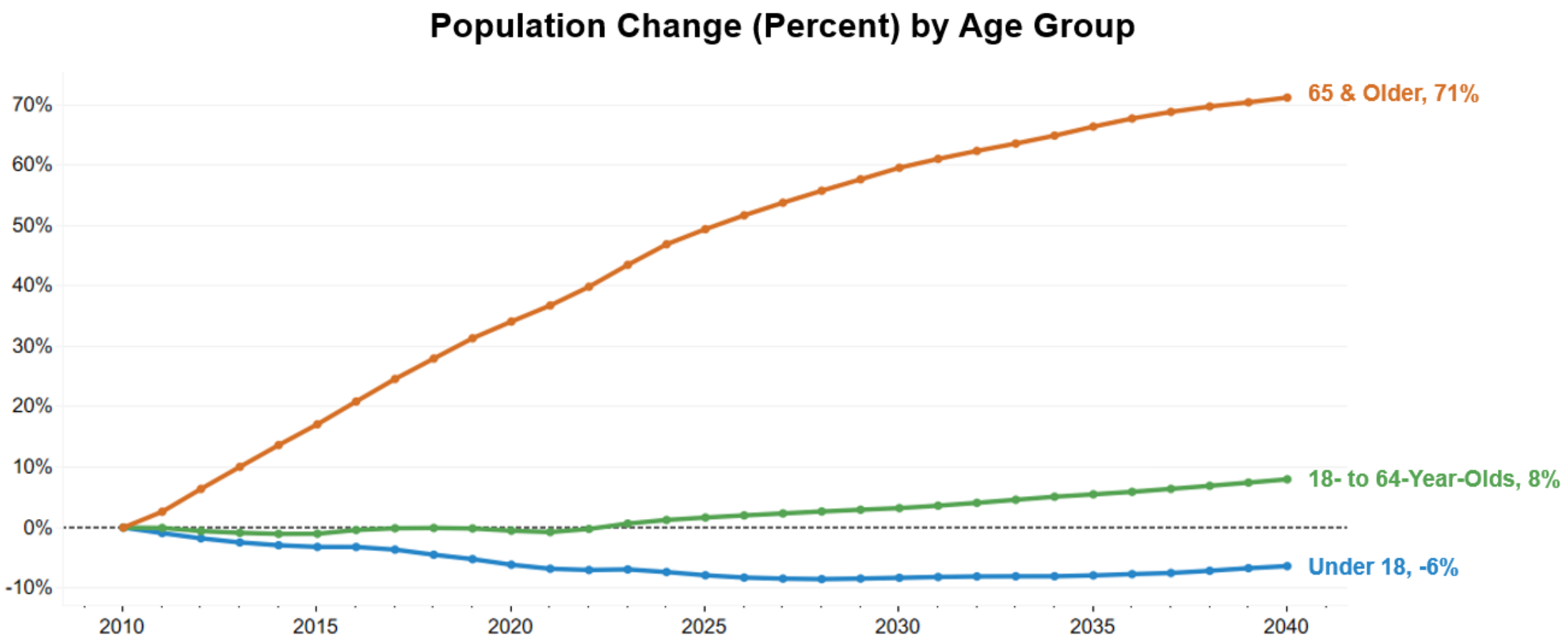
Regional Growth Slowed Considerably in 2025



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, County Population Estimates and Components of Change (Vintage 2020, 2025)

Older Adult Population Growing Rapidly



Source: N.C. State Demographer's Office, Population Estimates and Projections

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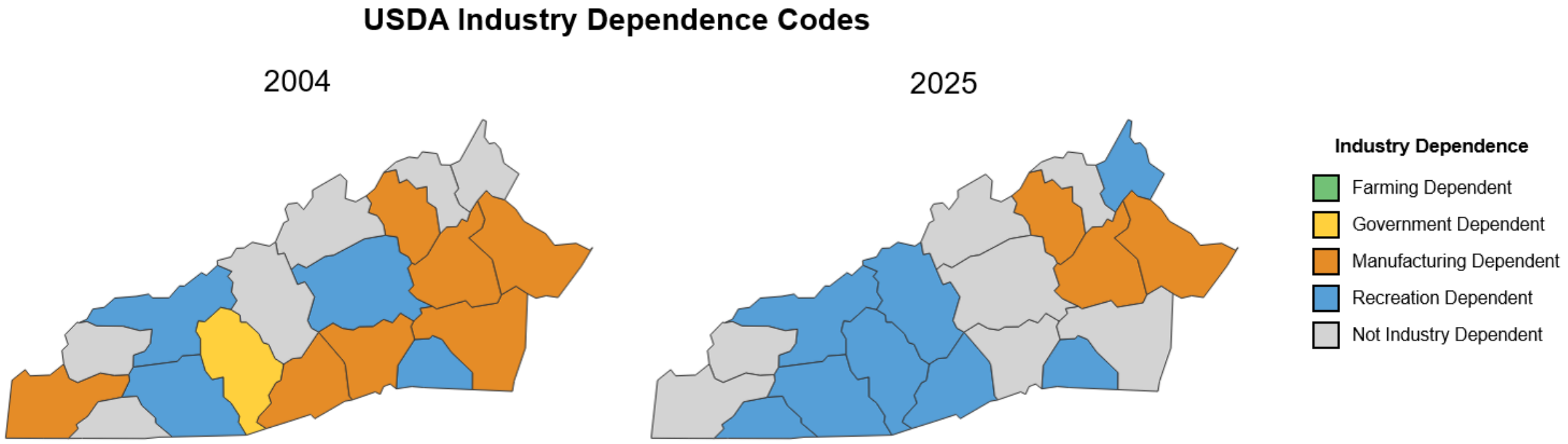
Recreation Now Major Industry



Dependent: Significantly higher than U.S. average employment/wages concentrated in a single industry.

Source: USDA, County Typology Codes (2004, 2025)

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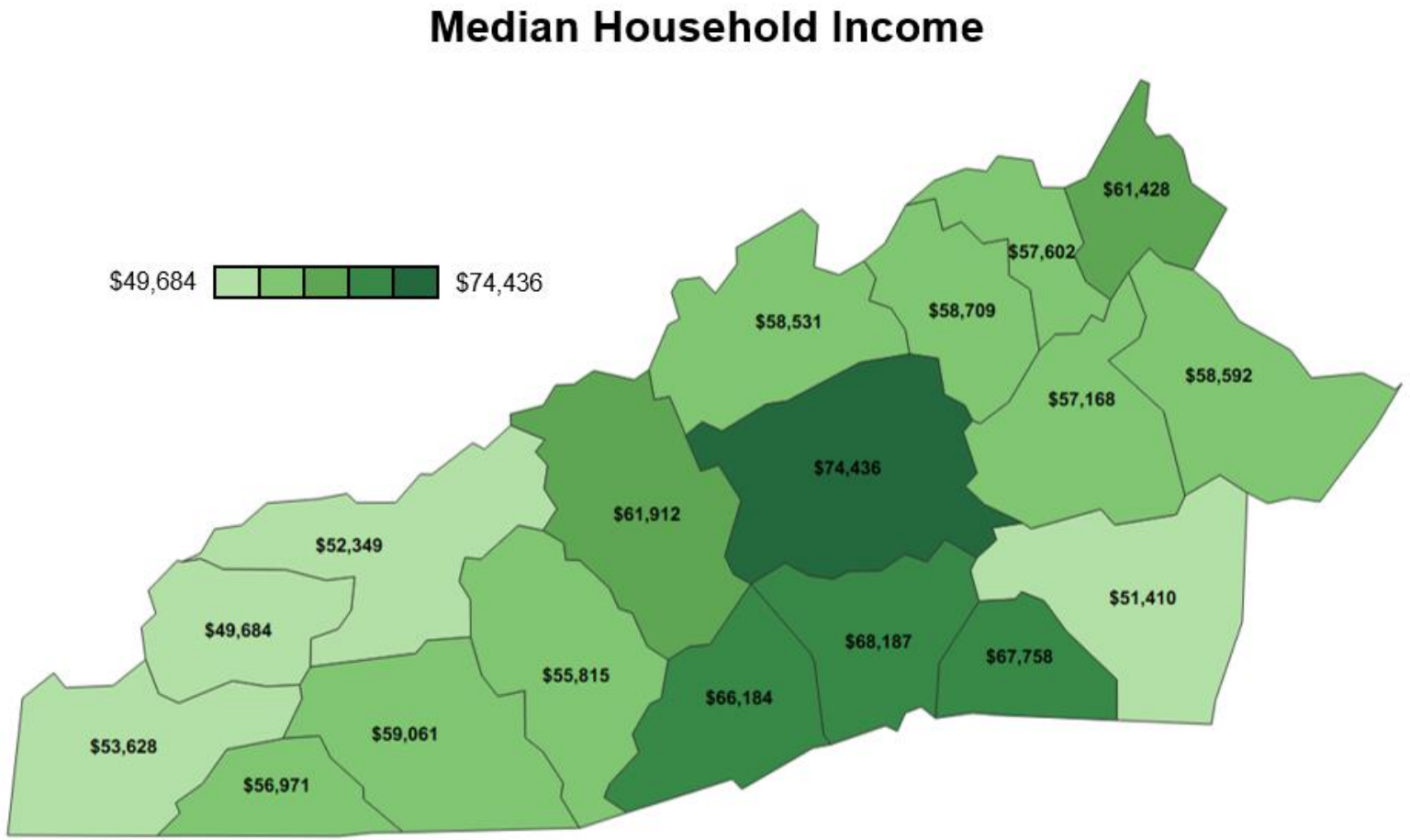
Household Incomes Vary Greatly



North Carolina
$72,388

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year (2020-2024)

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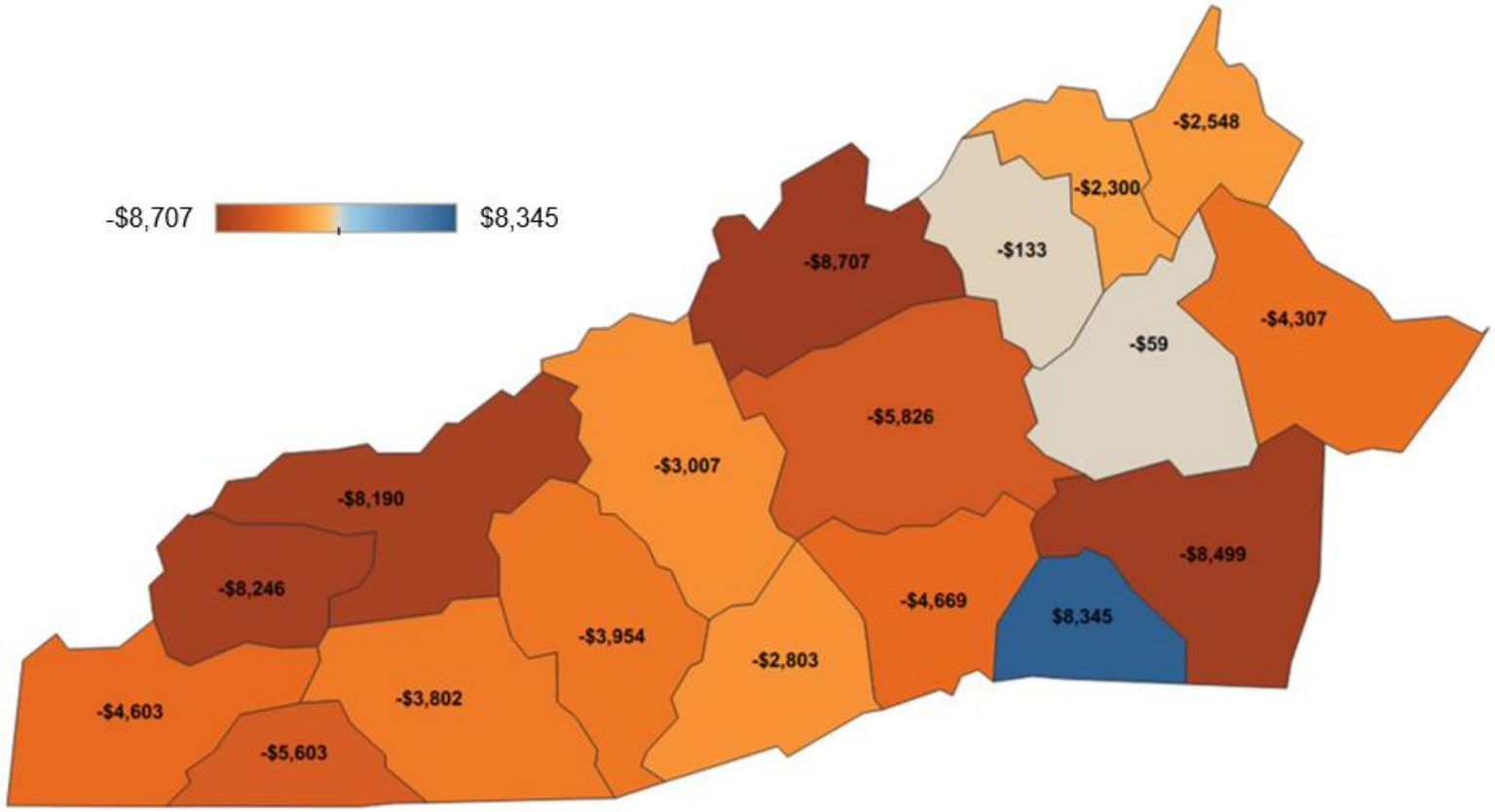
Incomes Often Do Not Meet Needs

Difference Between Median Household Income and Self-Sufficiency Standard

Self-Sufficiency Standard: Annual income required for a family (2 adults, 1 infant) to sustain a minimum but adequate standard of life



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year (2020-2024); University of Washington, Self-Sufficiency Standard (2023)

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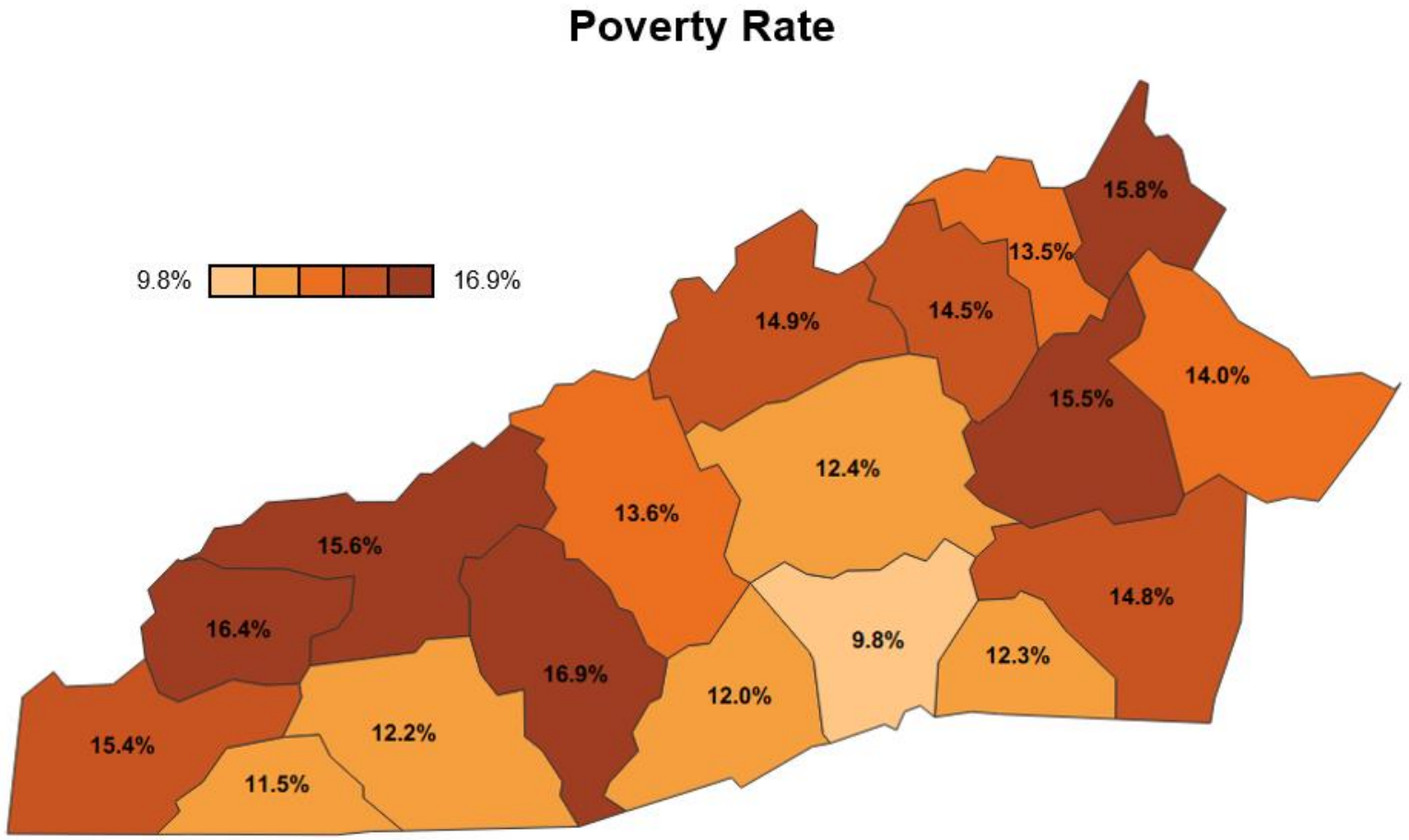
Poverty Improving, But Still High



North Carolina
12.6%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (2024)

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